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AS DREAMS FALL APART: The Golden Age of Jewish Stage and Film Music

1925–1955 • Ilya Levinson, dir; Julia Bentley (mez); Stewart Figa (bar); New Budapest Orpheum Society • CEDILLE 900000 151 (2 CDs: 96:00)

Review by: Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold



This important collection is the third in a series from Chicago's Cedille label which explores the music of Jewish cabaret both in Europe and in exile. The two-CD program, performed by the New Budapest Orpheum Society under the musical direction of Ilya Levinson, presents songs of Jewish composers of stage and film

music, as their journey takes them from the collapse of their world in Germany and Austria to the stages of America's cities and ultimately to Hollywood and the big screen. In these theater songs in Yiddish and German, the listener hears the transition from European operetta and cabaret to the foundations of the American musical. But even of greater consequence, perhaps, than the musical journey is the socio-political and human history which this disc traces as it captures the echoes of one of the darkest periods in history.

The program is divided into 10 thematic sections that chronicle the hopes, dreams, and traumas of a people. The extensive, scholarly programme note by Philip V. Bohlman is invaluable in adding dimension to the narrative. The New Budapest Orpheum Society performs with stylistic surety. The five-member instrumental ensemble, with Ilya Levinson as pianist and arranger, demonstrates complete mastery of the material, especially through Levinson's fleet pianism and Iordanka Kissiova's haunting violin. Mezzo-soprano Julia Bentley possesses a warm voice, rich in tonal color, and sensitive to nuance of music and text. Sometime cantor, baritone Stewart Figa, handles the music with lyrical ease and a wide dynamic range, and he is also comfortable in the biting wit of some of the songs.

The first disc begins with one instrumental and two Yiddish comic cabaret numbers, though *Dos pinteke Yid* (The Quintessential Jew) sets the prevailing tone of laughter mixed with tears. The second group by Kalmán, Korngold, and Abraham contains all operetta selections, sung with both lightness and longing by Bentley. Yet, the *Sehnsucht* is laced with dance rhythms and the jazzy accents of the New World. A trio of satiric numbers by Leopoldi follows, performed in German and English by Figa. The bitter humor of *Die Novaks aus Prag*, with its ominous march tempos in counterpoint to the melancholy nostalgia, is almost Brechtian in tone; it is followed by the cabaret song in English, *Composer's Revolution in Heaven*, in which a Jewish composer meets Beethoven, Chopin, Wagner, and Bizet beyond the pearly gates. The song mischievously

quotes these musical giants before migrating into quotes from *I Got Rhythm*. The last song, *Money macht froh*, is an ironic cabaret paean to wealth and greed. The last group includes a pastiche of Strauss melodies and two Ullmann songs which bridge the gap between *Traum und Trauma* (Dream and Trauma). The Strauss arrangement juxtaposes the exile's longing for *fin de siècle* Vienna with the reality of the *Anschluss* and probes the denial so present in this nostalgia. The Ullmann songs to texts by Hans Günther Adler are reminiscent of Brecht's existential vision both in the verse and the dissonances of the music.

The second CD focuses on dreams of the past and for the future. The first two sets continue with Leopoldi—a trio of Viennese-inspired drinking songs, the third, *Wenn der Ungar lustig ist*, replete with wild czardas and Yiddish dance rhythms. These are followed by two cabaret tunes for mezzo: the first, *In einem kleinen Café in Hernals*, is nostalgic; the second, *Wo der Teufel gute nacht sagt*, grapples with decaying modernity and the darker colors of cabaret music. The remaining groups reflect the progression of Yiddish stage music to the big screen in America. Eisler's *Five Songs from the Hollywood Liederbuch*, set Brecht's texts for a mezzo voice, supported by somber chromatics on the piano; declamatory in style, these are dark visions of the exile in the modern city. Figa sings of daydreams in two Yiddish songs in which *Ikh zing'* references the *Song of Solomon*. The concluding group features three numbers from Austrian expatriate Billy Wilder's 1948 film *A Foreign Affair*. The collection ends with "The Ruins of Berlin" with its post-war message of slender hope: "They won't return the phantoms of the past. A brand new spring is to begin, Out of the ruins of Berlin." The sound on the recordings captures perfectly the immediacy of a cabaret setting, and the accompanying booklet with Bohlman's essay, complete texts, and artist biographies is an excellent bonus.

As Dreams Fall Apart makes a memorable statement about a crucial time in theatrical music in the period before and after World War II in Europe and in America. As interest in the links between European operetta and cabaret and 20th-century American stage and film music flourishes, with many recent recitals and recordings of these once neglected composers, Cedille's newest release fills a significant and unique spot in this discourse, bringing vividly to life a chapter in the golden age of Jewish music. Highly recommended!